

**MARGI GRIEBLING-HAIGH** *Voices from the Other Side*<sup>1</sup>. *Cantilena*. **PÄRT** *Fratres*. *L'Abbé Agathon*<sup>1</sup>. **VILLA-LOBOS** *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5*<sup>1</sup> • Steven Smith, cond; <sup>1</sup>Gabrielle Haigh (sop); Erie Coast Cellists • NAVONA 6662 (68:00 📖)

This is a very enjoyable collection of five pieces for cello octet highlighted by a soprano soloist in three of them—all told, a unique album concept. The title work is a three-song cycle, *Voices from the Other Side*, which displays a lovely lyrical gift from composer Margi Griebbling-Haigh. Long *legato* lines for the soprano are well suited to the composer's conservative tonal idiom. These are settings of Edna St. Vincent Millay, a favorite poet for writers of art songs who are attracted to her genteel, romantic, personal style.

However, the opening song, "Some Things Are Dark," calls for ominous, agitated music, since the speaker is identified as "I am Nightmare." It receives a restless setting that very effectively builds an ominous atmosphere. Griebbling-Haigh asks for both bowed and pizzicato playing from the cellos, along with a few eerie gestures *sul ponticello* in the high-lying top line. A hymnal tone is given to "Prayer to Persephone," but with a twist. Millay implores the queen of Hades to be kind to a departed Vassar classmate who died in the historic 1918 flu epidemic. One takes it that Hades stands for the underworld of shades, not a hell. The setting is somber, at one point creating a flat affect through syllables on the same repeated note.

Rounding out the unexpected tone of those two poems is "The Curse," a playful malediction. The poet wishes her ashes to blow on the wind to far-flung places and to the reader's house, where she might be forgotten, "But I will be a bitter berry/ In your brewing yet." The scampering cello writing underlines the playful mood, while the vocal line is more plaintive and Spanish-tinged. This is an adroit, entertaining cycle, commissioned by the Cello Ensemble at the Cleveland Institute of Music in 1999. After a premiere employing 23 cellos, *Voices from the Other Side* was rarely performed, the composer tells us. It works quite well with only eight cellos, and lyric soprano Gabrielle Haigh gives a lovely performance against the sumptuous instrumental backdrop.

The other two works for cellos and soprano are Villa-Lobos's evergreen *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 5, a beguiling showcase for Haigh, and Arvo Pärt's unfamiliar *L'Abbé Agathon*. At 15 minutes, the work is a *scena* centered on 4th-century French legends about the hermit St. Agathon and his encounters with a leper (revealed in the end as an angel sent to test him). The text recites these legends, and Pärt's cello writing at one point depicts Agathon's halting gait as he takes the leper on his shoulders. The piece was commissioned in 2004 by a cello octet in Beauvais, France, and premiered with Barbara Hendricks as soloist. Pärt employs his signature mesmerizing style with arresting richness in the instrumental part, and Haigh is radiant and touching in the solo part.

The same conjunction of well known and unfamiliar is repeated in the pairing of Pärt's minimalist meditation on eight chords, *Fratres*, which has been recorded in multiple instrumentations. I'm not a fan of the composer, but multitudes are, and Erie Coast Cellos give an eloquent reading (I find no information about the group online, so I take it that they are *ad hoc*, assembled from eight solo-caliber musicians). Griebbling-Haigh supplies another work commissioned by the Cello Ensemble at the Cleveland Institute of Music, *Cantilena*, from 1999. It starts slowly with a canonic, dirge-like elegy that rises and falls in intensity. A restless *Allegretto* features a solo cello resolutely continuing the opening theme in four while the other cellos play in three; eventually everyone agrees rhythmically, ending in quiet resignation. (I don't hear the joyful tone mentioned by the composer.) The piece fits seamlessly with *Fratres*.

Akron-born, Griebing-Haigh comes from a musical family boasting three generations of composers. She earned her bachelor's degree at the Eastman School in oboe. Her career as an oboist has branched out not only into composition but also music copyist and running a small music publishing company of her own. This debut album is felicitous on all fronts, combining accessible, enjoyable works performed expertly and conducted with professional-quality leadership by Steven Smith. The package is rounded out with the informative composer's notes, full texts, and excellent recorded sound. **Huntley Dent**

Four stars: A felicitous release on all fronts